

Adjustments among Adolescents in Military Families When a Parent is Deployed

**Final Report to the Military Family Research Institute
&
Department of Defense: Quality of Life Office**

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Overview

This report summarizes the findings of a study supported by the Military Family Research Institute and the DOD Quality of Life Office that focused on the adaptations of adolescents in military families when a parent is deployed. Qualitative methods were used through focus groups conducted with youth attending camps in the summer of 2004. The research was implemented by Drs. Angela J. Huebner and Jay A. Mancini, of the Department of Human Development at Virginia Tech.

Because there are few systematic studies of adolescents in military families, the present study marks what we hope will be the beginning of an important line of inquiry. The findings presented in this report should confirm observations made by professionals who work with military adolescents and provide a context for exploring new ways to support adolescents who have a deployed parent.

The findings have general applicability to program development, whether the focus is on the provision of services or on curriculum development. Findings can serve as catalysts for discussions among youth development professionals, both inside and outside the military family support systems.

The Executive Summary of the report contains major findings themes and implications for program professionals as they support families and adolescents.

In addition to the Executive Summary, this report is divided into three major sections: (1) Study context and conceptual framework; (2) Study findings on adolescent adaptation; and (3) Study findings on adolescent support networks. Within these interrelated and overlapping sections on study findings are multiple sub-sections on major themes in the research; each of these includes a summary of results, direct quotes from focus group participants, and implications. Appendix A contains the focus group protocol and interview questions.

This document is a final, descriptive report and represents the conclusion of the funded project. Additional analyses will be presented through presentations at professional meetings (for example, see Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2005), and through publications in peer-reviewed periodicals and book chapters. These future analyses will complement recent research by Huebner and Mancini on adolescent adaptation among youth in civilian families (Huebner & Mancini, 2003; Mancini & Huebner, 2004).

Executive Summary of Study Results and Implications

Overarching Themes

- Adolescents demonstrate a great deal of resiliency when it comes to dealing with changes in their daily lives. Though deployment was a negative event in their lives, adolescents exhibited numerous adaptive responses.
- In many cases, the adolescents demonstrated great maturity as they willingly took on more responsibilities at home. Many referred to themselves as becoming another parent for younger siblings.
- Family support for the parent remaining at home is important to these adolescents as evidenced by their attempts to protect them (usually their mothers) and other siblings from negative emotions and stress.
- Adolescents are very aware of the dangers associated with deployment and the ways their lives are changed as a result of it.
- Adolescents' daily routines usually changed as a result of deployment. Some reported having to miss extra-curricular activities or programs because of transportation or financial issues.
- Many adolescents reported behavior changes when a parent is deployed. These included changes in school performance as well as symptoms consistent with depression.
- Adolescents exhibited a great deal of variability when it came to asking others for support when they felt stressed. Some confided in others, while others tended to isolate themselves.
- Adolescents who felt supported by others seemed to evidence enhanced resiliency, that is, their personal coping skills were complemented by support.
- Many adolescents were wary of the type of support offered by others. They were quick to point out incidences of insincerity and feigned experience with deployment from others.
- Adolescents have a great deal of access to their deployed parent. Most reported having contact via e-mail or phone at least once a week. In many cases, contact occurred multiple times a week.
- Although they report watching television and reading newspapers, adolescents were wary of media coverage of the war. They repeatedly stated that the media does not report events accurately. Many adolescents relied on their deployed parent to provide them with accurate information about the war.

Implications for Program Professionals

- Develop educational materials for parents to include information about:
 - the importance of taking a developmentally appropriate and intentional approach to discussing deployment and subsequent family changes with adolescents.
 - recognizing that adolescents' behaviors and emotions may vary with different stages of the deployment cycle, each requiring attention from parents.
 - modeling appropriate self-care and stress reduction, so that adolescents do not feel responsible for parental emotional well-being.
 - developmentally appropriate expectations about adolescents' behaviors and reactions to stress.

- signs and symptoms of depression and other mental health issues for adolescents.
 - the importance of consistent expectations about school work and behavior when families are under stress related to deployment.
 - the importance of maintaining family rituals and creating new ones to support family identity and continuity.
 - the range of emotions adolescents may experience and ways to teach them to express them in a healthy manner.
 - the awareness that their adolescents often do not have adequate ways to discuss their worries about parental deployment, and that some adolescents are not speaking with anyone about their concerns.
 - developmentally appropriate disclosures about family issues and war information.
 - the importance of getting adolescents involved in social support networks and information on potential opportunities for youth involvement.
 - encouraging adolescents to gain new life skills in areas such as stress management, cooking, budgeting, car maintenance, and lawn care, that can prepare them to successfully take on more responsibilities at home.
 - the importance of doing pleasurable things together as a family, as a way of building family rapport and supporting family adjustment to deployment.
 - ideas for documenting events and rituals the deployed member may miss.
- Educate youth serving professionals and other support personnel about:
 - the unique situation of adolescents with deployed parents. Because a broad array of formal support organizations come in contact with adolescents in military families, all could benefit from receiving information about families and deployment.
 - ensuring appropriate support systems for the at-home parent.
 - the importance of making a special effort to connect with adolescents that have a deployed parent.
 - recognizing signs and symptoms of depression and other mental health issues in adolescents.
 - the importance of providing ongoing, accessible social activities for adolescents so that they have distraction opportunities.
 - helping adolescents to develop social networks with other adolescents having deployed parents. These could occur in school, community, or religious organizational settings.
 - supporting the informal networks of adolescents by intentionally developing networking skills among adolescents that include how to communicate feelings, and how to develop bonds with other military adolescents.
 - developing social support or mentoring programs led by young adults who have themselves experienced the deployment of a parent.
 - ways to partner with other youth serving organizations to increase the number of available program options.
 - developing public awareness campaigns to educate local communities about issues facing military families.

- ways to recruit adolescents to participate in programs that include recreation as well as life skills development (e.g. stress reduction, cooking, car repair, babysitting, budgeting etc.).
- recognizing that a range of emotions are experienced by adolescents when a parent is deployed and tailoring intervention efforts to deal with these complexities, rather than assume a narrow range of emotional responses by adolescents.
- the significance of the deployment cycle and how adolescents' reactions vary depending on the specific stage, as well as on their own age.

Implications Related to Deployment Phases:

Pre-Deployment:

- Develop a checklist of potential responsibilities or duties that could change when deployment occurs. This list could include things like household chores, lawn care, babysitting, cooking, and transportation to extracurricular activities. Families can use this information to discuss and reach agreement about changes prior to parental departure.
- Provide skills building classes so adolescents feel prepared to take on additional responsibilities. These could include things like baby sitting certification, learning to do laundry, cooking classes, yard work, and minor repairs.
- Provide a list of formal support programs available to adolescents and families either through the community or through the military; include information on what these formal programs provide and a point of contact for each program (examples include Family Readiness Groups, military Child and Youth Services, local 4-H clubs, and community counseling services).
- Assist families in developing local neighborhood or community support systems (car pools, meal sharing, support groups) that can be activated during deployment.
- Encourage adolescents to research locations where the parent could be deployed. For example, what can they find out about the climate and culture of Afghanistan, Iraq or other Middle Eastern countries? Such information will help them to envision where their parent will be and what the living conditions may be like.

Deployment:

- Encourage parents to maintain developmentally appropriate expectations and roles while the service member is deployed. Encourage them not to expect their adolescent to act as another adult or parent.
- Encourage parents to model self-care and healthy coping strategies for their adolescents.
- Provide programs that address dealing with stress. Such programs should provide adolescents with practical ways to deal with the new stressors they may be facing as a result of changing responsibilities at home.
- Provide opportunities for distraction events. Many of the stressors adolescents face have no ready solution (e.g. worrying about parent safety) so distraction becomes a healthy response. These opportunities could take the form of weekend trips, dances, fairs, and sporting events. Transportation and cost issues should be considered since many families are under additional financial strain.

- Provide events/activities for the at-home parent and adolescent to participate in together (bowling, crafts, movies, etc.). Such an event could help them to spend fun time together outside of the potentially pressured home environment. Provide childcare for younger adolescents so the parent and adolescent can focus on each other.
- Utilize partnerships with other youth serving organizations (4-H, Boys & Girls Clubs, Girl Scouts/Boy Scouts, etc.) to provide more comprehensive activity options for adolescents.
- Educate parents about developmentally appropriate war-story disclosures, so that adolescents are not unduly exposed to war realities.
- Provide information about the media and how stories get covered. Help adolescents to become better consumers of news information.
- Encourage adolescents to start a scrapbook of important events that occur while the parent is deployed. These could be recorded in pictures, stories, videos etc. It can be shared with the deployed parent upon their return. Depending on access, it could also be posted on a website to be accessed by the deployed parent while they are away.

Post-Deployment/Reunion

- Educate adolescents about appropriate expectations for parent reunion.
- Educate the returning parent about developmental changes that may have occurred in their adolescent while they were away.
- Encourage family discussion and renegotiation of rules and responsibilities.
- Assemble a panel discussion of adolescents that have had experience with deployments and reunions. Ask them to share advice on dealing with a returning parent.
- Provide activities for returning parent and adolescent to do together. These activities can help both to get to know each other again and serve as a way to reconnect family members.

SECTION 1: STUDY CONTEXT AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Changing Nature of Military Service and Family Life

In recent years the context of military service includes higher operation tempo, increased deployments, relocations, and family separations (Military Family Resource Center, March 2000). The War in Iraq and the Global War on Terrorism have changed the course of military service for Active Duty, National Guard, and Reserve members. Over 140,000 troops are deployed in Iraq, and this level of commitment of troops will continue for quite some time (Spayd & Ricks, 2004). In short, more military families are facing more stressors than ever before. Adolescents in these families may be especially vulnerable because these unusual strains are being layered onto the normal strains that they experience.

A recent analysis of military families and resilience concluded that, “Resilient families are able to adapt and continue to function well during mobilization and deployments, and they are able to successfully meet other challenges of military duty and family life. Community linkages are needed to assist families with information and life skills as they strive to be self-reliant” (Martin, et al., 2004, p. 1). The focus in this report is on adolescent resilience, that is, their ability to respond to changes in family life related to the demands of military service.

The Deployment Cycle and Strains on Families and Adolescents

One of the organizing schemas in this report is the deployment cycle, and includes pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment (reunion). Each phase of the deployment cycle has unique associated family stressors.

Pre-deployment includes “mobilization” or that period when Service members prepare for war or other national emergencies by organizing their resources. Mobilization begins the process of family separation and the associated stressors. Families may have concerns about financial issues, employment, childcare, or social support. Depending on the family structure, plans may be made for the military connected adolescent to go live with relatives or other guardians. If the relatives are not nearby, this may mean changing schools and leaving friends. These are important issues families must consider before the military member leaves.

During deployment itself the Service member usually becomes geographically separated from his or her family. Regardless of whether or not the family has to relocate, the absence of the Service member in the family can be stressful. The Service member’s spouse is now acting as a single parent. He or she may have sole responsibility for maintaining the household and raising the children. The family financial situation may necessitate taking on a new job or changing jobs. If the deployed parent was a single parent to begin with, these problems are intensified. Adolescents may feel isolated if they are unable to communicate with their deployed parent. They may worry about the parent’s safety. Because of the changed family structure, they may be experiencing inconsistent parenting, or changes in the family schedule, responsibilities and rules. These changes may be particularly acute for National Guard and Reserve members who have traditionally had part-time commitments. They and their families may not have ever defined themselves as “military families” and thus never accessed military support systems.

Post-Deployment (reunion) is obviously a joyful time, but can also be a stressful. Depending on the length of the deployment, the family may have functioned without the military member for several months or even years. Usually the family has adapted to the new structure and roles. When the military member returns, it may upset the balance that had been achieved. Roles may need to be renegotiated. Returning military members may feel like they are no longer needed in their families. They may be concerned about their civilian employment status. Adolescents may be hesitant to give up newly acquired responsibilities.

Within each phase of deployment there are new strains on families, and on adolescents. In this study all the adolescents had experienced or were currently experiencing having a parent deployed. For some this was a first-time experience, while for others it was a second or third-time experience.

Adolescent Stress and Coping

Research on adolescent stress and coping suggests several consistent findings (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). First, adolescents' family environment influences their level of stress and coping abilities. Parents can model healthy or unhealthy ways of dealing with stress and their behaviors are often modeled by their adolescent. Second, the pile up of both major and minor stressors is related to poor adolescent adjustment, especially in the area of depression. Emotional stressors and role strain have both been identified as stressors for non-military affiliated adolescents (Bird & Harris, 1990; Rosen et al. 1993). Third, adolescents who rely on withdrawal as a major form of coping tend to display more depressive symptoms.

Several researchers have focused on the impact of deployment stress on children in military families. It is important to remember however that these studies are over a decade old. The number of dual-parent military families, the associated danger, length of deployments, and 24-hour news coverage have changed greatly since September 11, 2001. Unfortunately, the research literature on deployment effects on adolescents does not reflect the changing context of military service.

Researchers have linked parental deployment (usually defined as father deployment) to several youth outcomes. These include depression (Hillenbrand, 1976; Jensen, Martin, Watanabe, 1996; Levai et al. 1995), acting out or negative behavioral adjustment (Hillenbrand, 1976; Levai et al., 1995; Yeatman, 1981), poor academic performance (Hiew, 1992; Yeatman, 1981) and increased irritability and impulsiveness (Hillenbrand, 1976). Researchers note that boys tend to experience more of these symptoms than girls (Jensen et al, 1996; Levai et al. 1995). Results of a study on children's reaction to the Desert Storm deployment included increased tearfulness, increased discipline problems at home (particularly among boys), and increased demands for attention (Rosen, Teitelbaum, & Westhuis, 1993). Research conducted with military families also demonstrates that the mental health of the at-home parent (usually the mother) is very influential in determining child adjustment (Jensen et al. 1996; Medway, Davis, Cafferty, Chappell, & O'Hern, 1995, Rosen et al. 1993). Jensen and Shaw (1996) suggest that the effect of absences are mediated by several factors including pre-deployment family relationships, the age and sex of children, the meaning of the absence to the family, the extent of danger to which the military member is exposed, and how the remaining spouse deals with the absence.

Research conducted with non-military related youth suggests that adolescents under stress are more likely to employ maladaptive coping strategies (Wadsworth & Compas, 2002). It also suggests that adolescent adaptation is positively influenced by various social supports (Willis, 1986).

Adolescents are already facing multiple normative stressors including puberty and school transitions (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). Parental deployment may necessitate additional stressors such as relocation (especially if both parents are deployed or the adolescent is from a single parent family), changes in family roles, and daily routines. These changes may be especially pronounced for adolescents in National Guard and Reserve families for whom extended deployments are not common. These additional stressors may task the adolescents' limited coping resources beyond their capacity.

A Conceptual framework on Risk and Resilience

This research was mainly guided by the Double ABC-X Model of Adjustment and Adaptation (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983; Patterson & McCubbin, 1987; Patterson, 2002). In this model the "A" refers to the stressor, "B" refers to existing resources, "C" refers to the perception of "A" and "X" refers to the crisis. For our sample, the most observable stressor ("A") is the deployment of a parent, though we also recognize that for adolescents this age there are a number of normative developmental stressors as well (for example, fitting in with the peer group). The combination of this unusual stressor and the normative stressors fits with the pile-up part of the model. Existing resources ("B") are addressed in this study by a focus on informal and formal support networks that adolescents access. The perceptions and cognitions ("C") that adolescents have about their situations and about the deployment ("A") is reflected in our focus on asking adolescents to talk about deployment expectations and feelings, in particular, their view on its worst aspects. In this model, "X" represents a series of outcomes, or results from experiencing and managing the stressor. We focus on a range of "X" elements, including behavior changes and changes in roles and responsibilities. In addition to the fact that it focuses on stress and coping mechanisms, this model is particularly appropriate for studying adolescents in military families because it was originally developed to examine family resiliency in the face of war.

To further explore and explain the "B" elements in this model, we employed the concepts of formal and informal supports found in the Community Capacity-Building Practice Model (Bowen, Mancini, Martin, Ware, & Nelson, 2003). The Community Practice Model was designed to explore the relationship between formal and informal community-based social networks and family adaptation in military communities. These concepts were particularly useful as we explored the coping resources currently employed by adolescents. They also helped to inform potential intervention efforts at the community level.

Purpose and Parameters of this Study

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the many dimensions of the deployment experiences of adolescents in military families, so that military and civilian program professionals could be more intentional and directed regarding developing support programs for young people. Questions used in the study (see Appendix A) were far-ranging and provided opportunities for all participants to express their experiences.

Participants

Study participants were 107 adolescents ranging in age from 12-18 years. Gender percentages were about equal (46% female, 54% male). Ethnicity was reported as 61% White, 17% African-American, 7% Hispanic/Latino, 3% as Pacific Islander, 1% as Native American, and 10% as biracial. Active duty service representation included 39% Army, 3% Navy, 10% Air Force, and 4% Marines; 23% of participants had parents in the National Guard (all services), and 13% in the Reserves (all services). In this sample, very few adolescents had a mother who was deployed, consequently throughout the report references are to a father's deployment.

Adolescents were identified via their attendance in one of several camps sponsored by the National Military Family Association designed for youth with deployed military parents and through State 4-H Military Liaisons (a partnership between USDA Cooperative Extension and the U.S. Military). Study methods were evaluated and approved by the Institutional Review Board (human subjects) at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Each adolescent provided proof of parental consent prior to participation. Adolescents could withdraw at any time during the focus group discussions. NMFA camps in Washington, Hawaii, Texas, and Georgia elected to participate in the study. A group of Army Teen Panel adolescents were also included.

Data Collection and Analysis Methodology

Each of the 14 focus group sessions was comprised of 8-10 adolescents and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Questions focused on determining their experience with the deployment cycle, the elements of the ABCX model, and their formal and informal support networks. Focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed.

Qualitative data analyses were conducted using Atlas.ti software (Scientific Software, Berlin). Data analysis was conducted by a five-person research team, led by the Principal Investigators. The five person team was divided into two coding teams. Each team independently coded the focus group transcriptions using primary codes adapted from the focus group question categories. Each team reviewed the others codes and discrepancies were noted and discussed. This process was repeated until consensus was achieved. Reports of each primary code were reviewed and subsequent subcategories were developed using a similar consensus-building strategy.

In this report we cite broad patterns of respondent experiences, rather than exceptional cases. Since our approach is not quantitative we are not able to take a "regression" approach, one that more clearly indicates which of the many issues are prepotent. Experiences of our respondents

are diverse, suggesting a range of statuses regarding coping and well-being. Subsequent quantitative research can learn from our broad observations about stress and coping, risk and resilience, and construct more precise approaches to adolescent adjustment. What we have captured is the panoply of adolescent experiences when a parent is deployed, information that serves as catalysts for actions among professionals to support families.

SECTION 2: STUDY FINDINGS ON ADOLESCENT ADAPTATION

Most of the study findings are contained in this section of the report, and include a focus on the three phases of deployment (but mainly focusing on deployment rather than pre-deployment and post-deployment) and elements of the Double ABC-X Model (except for “B”, informal and formal support resources).

PREDEPLOYMENT

INTRODUCTION: Deployment actually begins well before any physical separation. The moment the Service member finds out he or she will be going away, changes in the family are evident.

QUESTION ASKED: Participants were asked to respond to this stem question: “When I first found out my parent was going away I felt...”

THEMES:

- **Changes in relationship with parent prior to departure.** Several adolescents admitted that they tried to distance themselves from their deploying parent. Some said they actually started fights with the deploying parent or found themselves becoming angry with them for leaving.
- **Adjustment was related to pre-departure communication.** For some adolescents, there appeared to be clear relationship between how the deployment was discussed and adolescent adjustment. Adolescents who said their deploying parent talked with them about what he/she would be doing, conveyed their love and tried to be supportive seemed to be coping better than those adolescents whose parent left without such discussions (or in some cases, without a goodbye at all).
- **Delayed reactions.** Some adolescents reported that they really didn’t give much thought to their parent’s deployment until after the parent had actually left.

QUOTES:

“I didn’t think that...I just kind of blew it [the deployment] off and didn’t really know it was going to be that long. And then when it started happening, started sinking in, it was hard.”

“...I just kind of kept away from my dad because, you know, I was kind of mad at him.”

“...I know my dad understands how I feel because before he left, like I don’t know, a couple of days before it, he sat down with us and talked with us, you know....Just, you know, he loves us and he’ll try and get back as soon as he can...”

“I was such a (expletive) to my mom before she left. So it’s like ‘I hate you,’ you know? And all summer I said that to her—I said that, “I hate, I hate you!” And the next thing you know she’s packing up her bags and going...”

“I used to hate my dad. I used to despise him or I didn’t...he was the worst person to me. And then he was...and then like I find out that he’s leaving and I really didn’t care at first. But then when I see him packing up his bags and getting all his stuff ready, I felt, I felt like a (expletive) myself because I didn’t help him through anything and I wasn’t nice to him through like everything else.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING:

Parents

- Encourage them to share information about the particulars of departure with their adolescent. This aids early adjustment.
- Help them to understand that adolescents' anger may actually be masking the fear they are feeling.
- Encourage parents to reassure adolescents that the deploying parent will do all they can to return safely.

Adolescents

- Help them to recognize that deploying parent is also under pressure and strain, and therefore requires patience from the adolescent.
- Help them to identify the emotions they are experiencing and ways to express them appropriately.

KEY POINT:

Parents who disclose (1) what the deployed parent will be doing, and (2) their own deployment-related concerns, will assist the adjustment of their adolescents. What and how much is disclosed should be adjusted by the parent according to the adolescent's age and maturity.

OVERALL FEELINGS ABOUT DEPLOYMENT

INTRODUCTION: An important element for ultimately understanding responses to deployment of a parent is the interpretation by the adolescent of what it all means. Adolescents who experience the same event will each respond differently to that event, becoming more or less adaptable, or being more or less upset.

QUESTION ASKED: How did you feel when you found out your parent was being deployed?

THEMES:

- **Ages of adolescents.** Numerous comments suggested feelings of confusion about deployment in particular, and the military in general—especially when adolescents were younger.
- **Loss.** Many comments indicated “loss” of an important figure, and described that loss in terms of what was missed during everyday life activities. Examples given included not having the parent to help with homework, to participate in activities with or to provide guidance.
- **Ambiguity and not knowing the future.** Adolescents often commented that a major initial feeling was not knowing whether or not they would see the deployed parent again, or when they would see him/her again.
- **Common feeling terms.** Throughout the interviews several terms were consistently mentioned when asked about initial responses to deployment: nervous, worried, confused, mad, lonely, isolated, sad, afraid, and shocked. On occasion a adolescent used the term “proud” and one said “I am glad he is there to protect us.” Few adolescents used positive terms to describe their feelings.
- **Conflicted feelings.** Occasionally adolescents indicated their feelings about the deployment were mixed, or in conflict—feeling both angry and proud.
- **Changing feelings.** Occasionally adolescents reported their feelings about the deployment changed, for example, from denial to recognition of the reality of loss.

QUOTES:

“Well I was kind of happy that he was going away because then I wouldn’t have somebody who’s always getting mad about something that I would do wrong. But then I was sad because he might not come back. I might never see him again.”

“When I was younger, I didn’t understand why he was leaving. I just didn’t understand the whole concept of the Army and, you know, your dad has to be deployed. I didn’t understand the process at all.”

“When my father got deployed, I was the only kid in my neighborhood whose dad got sent to that. So no one really knew besides just me and my sisters how we were feeling.”

“I just didn’t know how long they would be gone and when they would come back, because plans change a lot. And we just didn’t know like how long we would have to go without our parent.”

“Well, see I’m sad because I didn’t want him to go but he had to, so I am kind of mad. But then he’s done this a lot so it doesn’t really matter.”

“I wouldn’t say I feel mad but it’s kind of confusing about why he would want to do and put himself in that position.”

“I don’t like it. I mean, I just don’t like the military now.”

“I try not to think about it.”

“I was angry at everybody. I’m like a big daddy’s girl, so I was really sad he was going away. And I was scared something bad might happen to him.”

“I didn’t think anything at first. I just kind of blew it off and didn’t really know it was going to be that long. And then when it started happening, started sinking in, it was hard.”

“I feel enraged. Just means that he got taken away from me, they took my dad away from me.”

“When my dad was deployed I felt the same as I always do. Once you...if you’re born into the military, you get used to it.”

“Nobody cared what I thought.....my mom and my dad, because they, he just left. He just left without even asking anybody what they felt or whatever. And I know he has no choice, but it was still hard on everybody.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING:

Parents

- Because older and younger adolescents have a different understanding of the situation, encourage parents to use age appropriate language when discussing deployment with children.
- Help parents recognize that adolescents may be just as conflicted about the deployment as they are, and that adolescents may be happy and unconcerned one minute, and tearful and distressed the next.
- Help parents recognize that anger is a normal response to the situation and requires parents to help adolescents deal with their anger productively.
- Encourage families to engage in fun family activities prior to deployment. This provides adolescents with a positive focus, rather than a negative focus on the upcoming deployment.

Adolescents

- Help adolescents to develop an awareness of the emotions they are experiencing. This can become a significant coping strategy. They should also be encouraged to seek support from others.
- Help adolescents realize the importance of sharing feelings with family and friends, and to learn strategies for communicating complex feelings.
- Help adolescents recognize the importance of engaging in activities that distract them from negative deployment-related feelings.

KEY POINT:

Adolescents report a wide range of negative emotional responses to parental deployment, including feelings of fear, loneliness, anger, worry, and confusion; their understanding of the deployment varies as a function of age.

PRIMARY DEPLOYMENT CONCERNS

INTRODUCTION: While there are many aspects of deployment that are troubling or confusing to military adolescents, it is likely there are particular elements that cause them the most concern. Comments these adolescents made about the worst aspect of deployment cut across many other areas described in this report, including changes in responsibilities, effects on the remaining parent, and personal stress.

QUESTION ASKED: What is the worst thing about having a parent deployed?

THEMES:

- **Relationship Loss/Changes.** A common theme was losing the day-to-day relationship with the deployed parent. This was reflected in comments concerning changes in family routines, leisure and recreation activities typically done with the parent, and milestones such as birthdays and graduations.
- **Family Emotions.** In various ways, adolescents made comments reflecting greater intensity in family emotions such as anger, depression, and tension.
- **Reunion.** The more deployment-experienced adolescents focused on the difficulties of reunion--especially the difficulty of reintegrating the military member into changed family routines and changed family members.

QUOTES:

“Well you have basically do their old part, you got to do their part, or half their part, like you have nothing else to do; but its basically worrying and doing stuff and taking care of people.”

“I can’t go to sleep. Because they’re up and doing something and you can’t like, you’re thinking about what they’re doing.”

“The worst time is when the phone rings because you don’t know who is calling. They could be calling, telling you that he got shot or something.”

“Because like everybody was saying before, like when they come home is that awkward bonding phase all over again, like you are starting from scratch.”

“They have missed out on so much stuff and it’s like hard to catch them up with it.”

“You don’t get everything you want when they are gone. When your dad’s not home you don’t get to go fishing, go paintballing, go skiing, waterskiing, water tubing, playing sharks and stuff.”

“Not having a dad to depend on for like two years, and now my mom is always upset when we talk about him.”

“I don’t know. It’s like, and it’s really hard because you know, I felt really alone and no one would understand and stuff.”

“Because its hard on the parent that is left and gives them lots of stress because they know their husband isn’t home with them and they have to take care of their kids without any help.”

“I spend a lot of quality time with my dad, and I get along with him better than everybody else in the family. But now that he is gone, I feel left out because my sister and my mom relate better than I do with my mom.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING:

Parents

- Help them to recognize that adolescents are dealing with issues of loss when a parent is deployed.
- Suggest that they encourage their adolescent to keep a scrapbook or diary of missed events and activities that can be shared with the deployed parent upon return.
- Stress to them the importance of providing updates to the deployed spouse about what is happening in the family and the developmental changes that are happening with the adolescent. This may help to ensure realistic expectations upon the deployed spouse’s return.
- Encourage the parent to be prepared for a roller-coaster of emotions from the adolescent, and the subsequent importance of modeling productive emotional behavior for the adolescent.
- Encourage the parent to have family meetings when the deployed parent returns to discuss and renegotiate adolescent roles and responsibilities.

Adolescents

- Encourage them to establish ways to share events with deployed parent when he/she returns, for example, a diary or scrapbook of significant events.
- Help them to figure out strategies for communicating feelings with parents, including feelings that are difficult to describe. Help them to recognize that feelings of loss or ambivalence are common.
- Help adolescents to realize that everyone at home is stressed by deployment. Encourage them to be supportive rather than combative with other family members.
- Encourage adolescents to have discussions with the deployed parent, upon his/her return about how they have changed and what new responsibilities they have taken on.

KEY POINT:

Overall the “worst thing about deployment” was the disruption in routine, everyday life interactions with the deployed parent, reflecting the breadth of changes they continually faced.

STRESS: NORMATIVE AND DEPLOYMENT-RELATED

INTRODUCTION: Normative stressors are those that occur as part of normal development. Non-normative stressors are those that occur above and beyond those associated with normal development. Parental deployment to a war zone is a non-normative stressor. It is the co-occurrence of both types of stress that causes concerns. A pile-up of too many stressors has the potential to lead to adolescent adjustment problems.

QUESTIONS ASKED: There are many changes that go along with being a teenager. What kind of stresses do you have in your life right now? How do these change during deployment?

THEMES:

Normative Stressors:

- **Changes in parent's relationship with each other.** Many adolescents voiced concerns over how their parents related to each other. Topics included issues of divorce, separation, and fighting.
- **Relationship with parents.** Adolescents reported that they had disagreements or fights with a parent (typically their mother). Several also discussed distress over their non-custodial parent's involvement (or lack thereof) in their lives.
- **Siblings.** Many reported fights or irritation with brothers and sisters.
- **Friends.** Adolescents discussed their common concerns about others talking about them when they are not present as well as worries about boyfriend/girlfriend relationships.
- **Puberty.** Several adolescents discussed the questions or concerns they had about puberty. They mentioned wanting to be able to discuss their questions with their same-sex parent. This was expressed most by adolescent boys.
- **School.** Many adolescents expressed worries about grades and older adolescents worried about getting into college.

Non-Normative Deployment Stressors:

- **Death/injury.** Adolescents reported concerns about their deployed parent being killed or injured in the line of duty. These concerns were always present.
- **Dad will be different.** Adolescents said they were concerned about what their deployed parent will be like upon return. Many feared that, given his experience, the parent may be physically or emotionally different or unrecognizable.
- **At-Home Parent.** Many adolescents reported concerns over mom's high level of stress and the increased number of disagreements or fights they were having with her.
- **Media.** Adolescents said that graphic images displayed by the media generate fear about the deployed parent's safety. They also expressed a distrust of the accuracy of the information presented.
- **Inappropriate disclosures.** Several adolescents talked about the stories of near-misses their deployed parent shared. While these stories seemed to be intended to illustrate what the parent was going through and that he/she was okay, the stories often served to generate more fear about safety.

- **Other family members.** Adolescents voiced concerns over how others (e.g. mom, siblings) are dealing with deployment and feeling like they have to act more grown up to protect them (e.g. becoming confidant for mom).
- **Friends.** Many adolescents said their non-military friends don't understand the stress the adolescents face and other military adolescents don't want to talk about it. Others said their friends were supportive.
- **Money.** Several adolescents said they were worried about their family's financial situation because of pay cuts or missing child support payments.
- **Uncertainty.** Most adolescents voiced their frustration over the uncertainty about what is happening with the war or when deployed parent will be allowed home.

QUOTES:

"I wasn't really scared when he left but, like a month ago he said he was in a four-hour shooting thing, and that he ended up killing the other guys and stuff. And it really messed with him. He's upset and stuff. And that really got me kind of scared and thinking."

"When he [dad] went away, I was just getting to be a teenager. So the problems with becoming a teenager, I didn't really have anybody to turn to or talk to. And it was just hard coping with that."

"...I feel like I can't relax. I'm always stressed and worried about something—my brother and sister, my mom, my dad, my friends. When I finally get one thing right, something else always seems to go wrong. And I'm always trying to like help my mom and stuff and be helpful, but there's only so much a 13-year-old can do. And it's just hard without my dad there to kind of help and stuff. And I like it when he's home because then I can just act normal and stuff and just have fun."

"Media makes you feel worse because you hear about all the people that are being killed and stuff, so you worry about whether my dad could get killed."

"...Just because I'm suffering because my dad's gone, I mean my sisters are going to be too. So I can't just be like leave me alone, you know because I'm not doing well because Dad's gone. I can't say that. I can't do that. I have to, you know, deal with it and help them deal with it because they are younger."

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING:

Parents

- Encourage parents to remember they are the adults and that they need to be realistic about what information adolescents can handle. Maintain realistic expectations about adolescents' responses to the deployment.
- Encourage parents to maintain consistent expectations and family patterns. If changes to routines must be made, it is helpful to adolescents to be involved in the discussion.
- Remind parents that the deployment situation requires increased supportiveness when it comes to homework and school activities.

- Encourage parents to recognize the range of emotions that adolescents experience during a deployment, and to help them express emotions in healthy ways. This will greatly aid in adjustment.
- Let parents know that they can help adolescents most by modeling healthy behaviors and expression of emotion.
- Teach parents to recognize the signs of adolescent depression.
- Encourage parents to encourage adolescents to join support groups and to participate in distracting activities.

Adolescents

- Help them to recognize the importance of becoming aware of their own stress level, and of learning healthy ways to express emotions.
- Educate them on the merits of getting involved in recreational, social and learning opportunities as ways to diffuse stress.
- Help them to recognize that it is acceptable to have fun even though a family member is deployed.
- Encourage them to be supportive of the at-home parent without trying to take on parental roles.
- Help them to become comfortable with seeking support from others (for example, with challenging school work if needed).
- Educate them about the signs of depression and the importance of monitoring themselves for negative feelings, as well as ways to discuss these feelings with a parent or other trusted adult.
- Help them to identify caring adults in whom they can confide.

KEY POINT:

Adolescents in military families experience the usual array of normative stressors, and beyond that have critical concerns during a parental deployment that could dramatically alter their lives.

REACTIONS TO AND HANDLING STRESS

INTRODUCTION: Reactions to stress can be quite diverse. Understanding adolescents' reactions to stress is important because their reactions will lead to positive or negative adjustment, and this in turn may require intervention from parents or from helping professionals.

QUESTION ASKED: What do you do to help you feel less stressed?

THEMES:

- **Distractions.** The majority of adolescents mentioned using some form of distraction when they felt stressed out. Examples included things like sleeping, reading, drawing, playing computer games, listening to music, prayer, playing with pets and trying not to think about the situation.
- **Sports/Exercise.** Many adolescents said they dealt with stress through exercise. Examples included running, swimming, team sports, and lifting weights.
- **Lashing Out.** Adolescents also reported that they would often “lash out” at others for things that normally wouldn't upset them. These “lashing out” behaviors were primarily verbal—with increased arguments and yelling. Adolescents that reported this behavior often also talked about feeling like they needed to stuff their emotions to protect other family members.
- **Friends.** Some adolescents reported confiding in friends, but a surprising number said they did not want to bother their friends. They mentioned that they either didn't think their non-military friends would understand or that their military friends were dealing with similar issues so they saw no point in talking about it.
- **Self-Harm.** A few adolescents mentioned snapping themselves with a rubber band as self-harming behavior. Others reported daydreaming about hurting themselves because they thought their deployed parent would have to come home if they did.
- **Isolation.** Several adolescents mentioned feeling like they couldn't talk to family or friends about their stress because they felt like it would become an unnecessary burden for them. These adolescents reported engaging in many of the distractions listed above.
- **At-Home Parent Support.** For some adolescents, their mother was their greatest resource. They mentioned her as a supportive person who helped them to feel better. For others, mom became a source of stress during deployment because they recognized that she was overwhelmed as well.

QUOTES:

“I don't really deal with it. I try not to. ... I just kind of hide it and I don't really deal with it until it gets to the breaking point where I'm just like ugh! And I can't take it anymore.”

“...And like you can't really talk to my mom about it because she was stressed and doing all this stuff, and it just made her feel, you know, worse; and then that made my dad feel bad because she tells my dad everything, all that stuff. And then my brothers and sisters you know, they're going through the same stuff, but you know, they're still your brothers and sisters sand so there's only a certain point you can talk to them.”

“When I normally get stressed out I ask if I can go to the gym or something, to lift weights....It’s like lifting up all that metal puts a lot of strength to your to be ...and makes you all tired so when you go home, you don’t have to worry about anything. You just go to sleep.”

“I always feel like I have to hurt myself or something because then if I do, my dad will be able to come back.”

“Sometimes I—like, not because I mean to or anything—but I get snappy, sometimes because all the stress just leaps onto other people.”

“Sometimes I just have to leave and get out of where I am because I don’t want to accidentally...because when you’re under as much stress as most of the people are that have parents gone, when you’re under as much stress as a lot of us are, you...every, all your emotions, it just mixes up and you might just go off on someone if they say something wrong about anybody. It’s like there can be someone I don’t even know ...and he says something to someone over there and then I’ll get mad just because I got all these other emotions mixed up. And I’ll just get mad for no reason and I might just go off, and I don’t want that to happen...”

“Just not think about it, because if you think about it, sometimes you get sad and stuff. So you just like try not to forget it completely, just like not think about it as hard as some people do.”

“When my dad was getting deployed, it’s just really hard because my sisters whine a lot and, I mean, they whine now. But it’s just horrible when he’s gone. And every night they always cry. I feel like crying along with them, but I just hold it in.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING:

Parents

- Because adolescents handle stress in many different ways, help parents recognize the importance of providing healthy outlets for them, whether they are sports-related or involve spending more time with close friends.
- Encourage parents to learn the signals their adolescent sends when troubled. Do they become hostile or withdrawn? Such knowledge will help parents can improve the support they can provide to their adolescent.

Adolescents

- Provide opportunities for adolescents to exploring alternative, healthy ways to reduce stress. At the same time, educate them about the importance of recognizing unhealthy responses to stress.
- Encourage them to seek out fun and supportive activities with other adolescents.

KEY POINT:

Relatively few adolescents deal with their stress by reaching out to others. Instead, many isolate themselves, preferring to engage in solitary activities.

CHANGES: ROUTINES & RESPONSIBILITIES

INTRODUCTION: Whenever the composition of a family changes, routines and responsibilities must be adjusted. For some military families, these changes may occur on a fairly frequent basis. Others may be experiencing it for the first time. When approached correctly, these changes can be an opportunity for growth.

QUESTION ASKED: How does your life change when a parent is deployed?

THEMES:

Responsibilities.

- **More Care of Siblings.** Many of the adolescents reported having to take on more child care responsibilities when a parent was deployed. This was due in part to the at-home parent having to take on other responsibilities or work outside the home.
- **More household chores.** Adolescents reporting having to help out much more around the house. Some mentioned having to take on chores that the deployed parent was previously responsible for; others mentioned having to pitch in more because the at-home parent had to go to work.
- **Elevation to co-parent.** Some adolescents reported feeling like they were ‘promoted’ to co-parent. This was evidenced by the at-home parent confiding in them more and giving them more responsibilities for younger siblings.

Routines.

- **Fewer activities.** Because of transportation, scheduling or financial burdens, several adolescents reported that during deployments, they were unable to participate in their usual extra-curricular activities.
- **Boredom.** Boredom was a theme primarily for younger adolescent boys. Many said they missed their fathers as playmates—not being able to hunt, fish, shoot, camp etc. as frequently as they did when he was home.
- **Changing relationship with dad.** Many adolescents talked about being concerned about how their relationship with their deployed parent would change as a result of his/her being away. Adolescents frequently mentioned that, because of the increased responsibilities they had assumed, they had matured. They were afraid their returning parent would not recognize these changes, and expect them to be the same way they were before the deployment.
- **More bonding with siblings.** Several adolescents talked about becoming closer to siblings as a result of the deployment. Some cited having to work together more to support one another because of the at-home parent’s stress or because they had to take care of younger siblings.
- **Changes in family routines/rituals.** Many adolescents said that family routines become much more lax in terms of when and how things get done.

QUOTES:

“And just when he’s (dad) not there, everything is looser. Like you know, I’ll do my homework maybe after I eat dinner and stuff. And like maybe I’ll just do things in a little different order when I’m around my mom.”

“...when my dad’s not there, I’m not, you know, the child any more. I have to like kind of almost fill in for the other parent because the only thing my mom really cares about is that I’m ready to babysit.”

“I kind of have to be the strong one with my mom and then my younger sister.”

“He knows everything else [about home repairs], like I’m going to pick out this wrench and fix this window, or you know, we have to fix the TV or whatever. And so, you know, we don’t know what to do. We have to call in experts, you know, business, whatever and you kind of get sad because he’s gone.”

“His promotion to me as man of the house.”

“When my dad was getting deployed, it’s just really hard because my sisters whine a lot and, I mean, they whine now. But it’s just horrible when he’s gone. And every night they always cry. I feel like crying along with them, but I just hold it in.”

“...I grew closer to my little sisters just because, you know, they’re missing dad too. Just because I’m suffering because my dad’s gone, I mean, my sisters are going to be too. So I can’t just be like “leave me alone” you know, because I’m not doing well because dad’s gone. I can’t say that. I can’t do that. I have to, you know, deal with it because they are younger.

“I usually do a lot of school sports...but now with this [deployment]I don’t have transportation very often t go to those activities and I usually have to skip them...Since my dad’s deployed, track season started, and I really wanted to run track...”.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING:

Parents

- Encourage families to hold periodic family meetings prior to the deploying spouse’s departure to discuss changes in roles and responsibilities. This can be important for all family members. Parents can take this opportunity to make sure everyone understand what their contribution to the family will be.
- Encourage parents to provide opportunities for adolescents to learn new skills that can help them contribute to the family, especially since it appears that many adolescents take on new responsibilities. Examples might include skills in babysitting, cleaning, cooking, lawn mower repair, and minor car maintenance.
- Encourage parents maintain developmentally appropriate expectations about responsibilities.
- Encourage parents to find role models that can act as mentors. This may be especially important for young adolescent boys.

Adolescents

- Provide opportunities to learn new skills that will aid adolescents in taking on new tasks at home. Encourage them to become a positive and contributing member of their family.

KEY POINT:

Changes in responsibilities can be positive as adolescents learn to be more “responsible” or negative if they become overwhelmed and feel unsupported.

CHANGES IN BEHAVIORS

INTRODUCTION: Previous research suggests a clear link between deployment and changes in adolescent behavior. However, these behaviors have typically not been viewed in the context of their impact on the family as a whole. Much of the research reported negative changes such as acting out or poor academic performance. Little attention has been paid to positive changes that may occur as a result of deployment.

QUESTION ASKED: Has your behavior changed since your parent was deployed?

THEMES:

- **School Performance.** In many cases adolescents reported that their grades worsened as a result of a lack of concentration, having less time for homework due to increases in other responsibilities or the fact that the deployed parent was not there to enforce completion. In a few cases, adolescents reported that they actually improved their grades in an effort to prove to the deployed parent that everything was okay at home.
- **Hiding emotions.** Many adolescents mentioned that they tended to hold their emotions in an effort to protect other family members who were also emotional.
- **Lashing out/anger.** Adolescents reported feeling like they were sometimes quick to anger. They recognized that they often lashed out at others for things that normally would not have bothered them.
- **Having to act older.** Adolescents reported feeling like they had to act older in an effort to help or protect the family. In some cases, they reported feeling like a co-parent for younger siblings.
- **Depression.** Adolescents reported several signs consistent with depression including lost interest in regular activities, isolation, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, sadness and crying and in at least two cases, psychiatric hospital admission.
- **Disrespect.** Adolescents reported talking back more to the at-home parent and teachers.
- **Worrying.** Adolescents said they often found themselves daydreaming about what their deployed parent was doing. They voiced great concern about his/her safety.
- **Severity.** These behavior changes ranged from slight to severe, with some requiring professional intervention from counselors and therapists.

QUOTES:

“When my dad left, I stayed separate from the family. I would really keep to myself. I hid my feelings because when my dad left...And so I was taking on more and more responsibilities and I was taking charge so I tried to hide my feelings because my mom and my sister were constantly crying and stuff so I was always trying to comfort them. And I couldn’t show any emotion for that because I had to be the strong one. I was hiding my emotions at certain times then always lashing out at certain people that maybe I shouldn’t have been.”

“You have to act older than you are in order to get everyone else to keep my mom evened out.”

“The first day he after he [dad] left, it was like no one wanted to do anything. We just wanted to sit in the house and stare at the walls...my grades were slipping and they are now too. All D’s and I get in trouble a lot more.”

“When my dad got deployed, because, I mean, I used to be a little bit mean at school but when he got deployed—because, I, I’m really close to my dad, I’m not really close to my mom—so when he got deployed I just got more upset. And when people said stuff to me that I didn’t want to hear, I just kind of yelled at them and told them to stop it. My attitude changed a lot.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING:

Parents

- Educate them about the importance of maintaining consistent expectations and patterns—especially around homework and discipline.
- Encourage them to learn to recognize the range of emotions adolescents may experience during a deployment. Encourage parents to help their adolescent to realize that these are normal and that there are healthy ways for them to be expressed.
- Teach parents to monitor their adolescent for isolation, depression and other potentially serious mental health issues.
- Educate parents about the signs and symptoms of depression.
- Help parents encourage adolescents to socialize with other adolescents having deployed parents.
- Help parents to encourage adolescents to voice their concerns but also provide them with opportunities to just have fun.

Adolescents

- Teach adolescents healthy ways to deal with negative emotions.
- Provide avenues for adolescents to seek help with homework if they are having trouble in school.
- Help adolescents recognize the symptoms of depression. Encourage them to seek help if they find themselves becoming depressed.
- Provide opportunities and encouragement for adolescents to socialize with other adolescents who understand their experience and with those who will help them to have fun!

KEY POINT:

Most adolescents reported behavior change that coincided with deployment, with most changes being negative.

CHANGES IN AT-HOME PARENT

INTRODUCTION: Parents and adolescents are influenced by each other in both positive and negative ways. Parents can role model both positive and negative behaviors, both of which will be reflected in their adolescents. With deployment, family responsibilities become entirely the responsibility of the at-home parent, in most cases a mother.

QUESTION ASKED: Do you see changes in your at-home parent when the other is deployed?

THEMES:

Depression. Many adolescents reported changes in their mom's behavior and emotions. Many of these changes are consistent with signs of depression. These include being very emotional, more sleeping and being absent-minded or being "off in another world".

Quick to Anger. Adolescents often described their mother as having a "shorter fuse" or being much more "snappy" than usual.

Stressed out. The vast majority of adolescents described their mothers as being stressed out. Many attributed this to the fact that their moms had to take on more responsibilities, their worry about the deployed spouse, and concerns over financial matters.

Relationship with adolescents. This finding was split between those adolescents reporting being able to spend more time with their mother as a result of the deployment (fewer distractions) and those who reported spending much less time with mom due to her increased responsibilities. Not surprisingly, those who reported spending more time with their at-home parent also reported more satisfaction with the relationship.

QUOTES:

"I could tell that my mom was getting like really depressed and since she wouldn't talk, I wouldn't talk. And so around the house everyone was just kind of depressed for a little while and you can tell because they didn't speak a lot."

"...since he was gone for so long, she was able to get a bunch of time off work but get paid the same. So we got to like go to more movies and stuff like that together and hang...do other things during the day because she was home more and she didn't stay at work as long as she usually would."

"I'm like always worried about my mom and stuff because, again, she's always dashing everywhere ...she's always so freaking worn out."

"...my mom acts different, too, when my dad's gone. It's like she's not her normal self. She's kind of like stressed out and stuff. And her stressed out affects on me too..."

"...your mom or dad starts acting weird. Like my mom breaks out in this really emotional thing, a really emotional like problem."

"When my dad is gone—the entire time he was gone—my mom she just didn't try hard."

“Well another good change is since my dad left, my mom has been able to adapt and kind of do what she normally and what my dad does.”

“...it’s just a lot more stress on her. Like she holds stress pretty well, but she just like, if me and my sister are acting up, she gets mad a lot easier.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING:

Parents

- Strongly encourage parents to take care of their emotional health. Parents can benefit from education that focuses on adult emotional needs and how to meet them. Parents may be unaware of how closely adolescents monitor and mirror parent’s emotions and behaviors.
- Provide parents information about the benefits offered through the civilian or military community that may lessen their own stress level.
- Provide both formal and informal ways for parents to connect with other parents. This support can become an important respite to be accessed when stress is highest.

Adolescents

- Help adolescents to realize that parents are mainly responsible for their own emotional health, rather than adolescents being responsible.

KEY POINT:

Adolescents pay careful attention to and sometimes feel responsible for the well-being of the at-home parent, including their moods, and agitation level.

POST-DEPLOYMENT AND REUNION

INTRODUCTION: While reunion with families should be a happy time, it can actually be very stressful. Family members may have become comfortable with their new roles and responsibilities and may hesitate to give them up. Similarly, the returning parent may be unclear about what their role in the family should be.

QUESTION ASKED: What is it like when that parent returns?

THEMES:

- **Concerns about recognizing the absent parent.** Several adolescents mentioned being worried that their deployed parent will have changed so much both physically and emotionally that they would no longer recognize them. Some mentioned physical changes (such as weight loss) while others mentioned concerns about their parent's nightmares.
- **Issues with family reintegration.** Many adolescents who had experience with reunions mentioned the difficulty of reintegrating the absent parent back into the family. This difficulty centered in part on the fact that routines and responsibilities had changed and the returning parent wasn't aware of the new routines or that the returning parent expected everything to be the same as it was when he or she left. Some spoke of giving the returning parent 'token' things to do so they felt useful and needed.
- **Lack of recognition of changes in adolescents.** Many adolescents mentioned that they had matured a great deal during the time their parent was deployed but that they felt like their returning parent didn't recognize or appreciate these changes, instead preferring to treat them the same way they did when they left.

QUOTES:

"Like when my dad got back, it was kind of hard because he had been away from the family for so long and we were all able just to depend on mom so it was kind of hard letting him back into the family. And then also the experiences he got over there were all like fighting and stuff. Sometimes you would hear him shouting in his sleep."

"Well when my dad left, everything's going one way when he come back, and he's starting off right where he left so...There's just a big clash and that starts a lot of problems...Like he forgets that he's been gone for like a year or six months. So he still thinks we're a lot younger and while he was gone we matured a lot over the year. And he's still trying to treat us the way we were treated a year ago."

"...Like when they come home is that like awkward bonding phase all over again, like you're starting from scratch. And then like they've missed out on so much stuff and it's like hard to catch them up with it. Like some of the stuff you just had to be there and they weren't. And it's not like you can be mad at them for it, like inside you're going to be a little bit mad, but you know it's not their fault."

"And that's like it was a lot harder for us too, you know, to get into the routine of having it back than it was for him to leave...Because there were responsibilities taken up by each of us and then when dad came home, we didn't have to have those responsibilities anymore but we were used to

them and so that caused a change also. And so it's just like of like, okay, what do we do now? We can't go back to being who we were because we're not that anymore. We have to move forward, but it's also something you have to do as a whole family. "

"...So when they try to come back and like, you know...try to help you do things you already know and you've been doing it. It's a ritual day after day. They [deployed parents] come and try to change things. It's kind of difficult."

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING:

Parents

- Help parents recognize that the adjustments of post-deployment may equal those associated with pre-deployment and deployment. Encourage them to give themselves time to readjust to being together as a family.
- Encourage parents to discuss changing roles and responsibilities with their adolescents, making sure that they give proper credit and praise to adolescents for their contributions. Changes should not be viewed as 'demotions.'
- Remind the "returning" parents that family changes while they are gone are to be expected, and to anticipate a re-adjustment period upon return.

Adolescents

- Encourage them to show patience with the returning parent while the family reorganizes.
- Encourage the adolescent to explain to the returning parent the changes have occurred in his or her absence.
- Encourage the adolescent to willingly adapt roles and responsibilities as the family reorganizes itself.

KEY POINT:

Because a great deal of physical, cognitive and emotional development may have occurred during the deployed parent's absence, there should be an intentional focus on how relationships change as a result. The post-deployment family differs from the pre-deployment family.

SECTION 3: STUDY FINDINGS ON ADOLESCENT SUPPORT NETWORKS

This final section of findings focuses on support resources, including those associated with informal and formal support. Included are support processes, and adolescent's "wish list" of support resources.

INFORMAL SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION: Support received from family members, friends, and others not connected with a support service or program can be invaluable for providing opportunities for adolescents to deal with concerns associated with a parent's deployment. Informal support can be evidenced in talking about worries, or provided merely by having others to spend time with in enjoyable activities.

QUESTION ASKED: Who do you go to when you are stressed?

THEMES:

- **Sources of informal support.** Adolescents mentioned a number of sources that were supportive to them, including parents and grandparents, friends who are also in military families, as well as friends who are not. Some also indicated they did not seek out people with whom to talk about deployment-related worries.
- **Preferred support sources.** Adolescents were divergent regarding who was preferred as a source of informal support. Some felt their parents, particularly mothers, were most helpful, whereas others were distant from parents. More felt other military adolescents were helpful, that is really understood their feelings, whereas some said other military adolescents were unresponsive because deployment was routine.
- **Helpfulness of informal support.** Adolescents reported that others often gave them a chance to release tensions by talking. Having others to engage with in activities diverted their attention from deployment worries.
- **Drawbacks of informal support.** Adolescents also reported that informal support may not be helpful. Some felt others almost over-reacted when hearing about their concerns on deployment, or felt that people were just being polite by listening to them.

QUOTES:

"At first when my dad first got deployed, there was a lot of support as in like people calling, people giving us, you know, food and stuff. But then as time went on, it just kind of died down and nobody really cared that he was deployed."

"When we had a hurricane last fall, the installation called to see if we were okay because they knew my dad was deployed."

"Sometimes it would be like we'd have people that bring weird stuff and then sometimes it would be a good thing. Other times it felt like they were just doing it out of pity. You know, sometimes you have that neighbor who wouldn't talk to you because someone's gone, you know, they're just doing it out of pity."

"And so I sort of feel like my best friends and their families become part of my family, and we treat each other like our extended family."

"Yes. I talk to them about that (deployment) but I don't like getting into all the details because they're [non-military friends], like, you know, what happens next? And I'll be like I don't know and they're like we want to know now."

“I don’t talk about my dad’s deployment. I don’t know. I just don’t like to talk about it. I don’t even know why.”

“I do confide in my friends a lot more than I did before.”

“My friend’s dad was in Iraq for like a, he went through the Desert Storm thing. And he remembers that and he’s pretty old. Not really old but he’s like a teenager and stuff, like 17. And he can just really relate to what I’m going through and he knows exactly.”

“My dad’s family is a lot more supportive of him and they act a lot nicer to my mom and just are more tolerant and open-minded.”

“I like to talk to people I know more than people I don’t know.”

“I won’t talk to my family about it because they just make it worse.”

“I’ve got one friend that will actually talk about it because she has a brother being deployed soon. But all the rest of my friends don’t, it sort of makes them uncomfortable for me to talk about it, and that makes me uncomfortable, too.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING:

Parents

- Educate parents about the important of encouraging adolescents to become involved with positive peer groups.
- Help parents realize that adolescents often do not have adequate ways to discuss their worries about parental deployment, and that some are not speaking with anyone about their concerns.
- Help parents to recognize that supportive intentions do not always translate into support that is valued or productive for adolescents. Adolescents have high expectations of their friends and place high value on being able to trust others. Consequently programs designed to bring adolescents together with others must be directed toward building supportive skills.

Adolescents

- Encourage adolescents to share concerns about deployment with family and with friends, so that informal networks are built. Help them to see that such networks can be productive.
- Encourage adolescents to allow others to provide support to them and their family. Encourage adolescents to assume that others’ intentions are good, even if they have no experience with deployment.

KEY POINT:

Adolescents recognize the importance of being supported by family, friends, and neighbors but also recognize that even the good intentions of others are not always helpful.

FORMAL SUPPORT

INTRODUCTION: We associate formal support as that originating within agencies and organizations, including churches, civic groups, as well as military agencies (for example, Child and Youth Services). Within these formal organizations, relationships among participants often develop, so that formal support and informal support become interrelated. Formal support personnel can include teachers, counselors and therapists, and youth workers.

QUESTIONS ASKED: When you are stressed, who do you go to for support?

THEMES:

- **Breadth and depth of formal support.** Compared to their comments on informal support, not a great deal was said about these formal support systems.
- **Formal support organizations.** Among the formal organizations mentioned were: youth centers, church youth groups, Cooperative Extension 4-H programs, schools, the parent's military unit, counselors and therapists, and Family Readiness Groups.
- **Key formal support personnel.** Even though adolescents had relatively less to offer regarding formal support systems, comparatively more of them cited a teacher or school guidance counselor as people they talked to about their concerns. These same formal support personnel were likely to be involved in organizing an intentional focus on military adolescent concerns.
- **Mixed reviews on school support.** For the most part, school-related personnel were seen as supportive but there were occasional comments indicating teachers really did not understand the situation of a military family adolescent.
- **Seeking people who understand.** Throughout the conversations on formal support sources, the word "understand" was common—adolescents were pointing to people who, because of their own background and experience, understood what they were experiencing. Adolescents especially valued adults in these organizations who had some experience with the military lifestyle, and consequently were more likely to open up to them.
- **Discomfort with formal support.** There was some indication that adolescents are uncomfortable with formal support. One commented, "I don't like that stuff. I'd rather deal with it myself." Others said that formal support would be more welcomed if it meant they interacted with people more their own age—in effect they desire peer support. Others noted that some organizations grouped them with younger children in support activities, which they did not like.

DESCRIPTIVE QUOTES:

"So a lot of the teachers are understanding because some of their spouses are in the military themselves. So they're really understanding about those issues."

"I really do not like that stuff. I like dealing with it myself. But for other people that do like need the support I think it would be a lot better if it was someone who actually went through it and is like not their age but around there somewhere so they could relate to them more. Because I tried that before, tried to do the one-on-one thing, and it was some old dude that pretended he

knew how I felt but I knew he didn't. So it really frustrated me that he thought he could do anything."

"I feel like my teachers are more understanding and you know, more apt to give me an extension on my homework because they know about my family. Because I had this one teacher whose dad was deployed and he died while he was over there. And you know, she just took me under her wing and was like my counselor throughout the rest of the year."

"My teacher knows my step-dad is in Iraq, and I really feel that she doesn't care and that she pushes me even harder."

"Where I live there's a program called the Nurturing Program. It's just like a big counseling session. Me and my mom and my sisters went. There was talking about the deployment and it was just a place where people would vent and talk about their frustrations."

"Like with my church and youth group. I mean, they tried to be as supportive as they could but some of them just didn't understand it, they couldn't comprehend what I was going through. But I mean my youth group was really great. They did Christmas boxes and Santa boxes for soldiers."

"Well I made new friends. I've met new friends talking about the soldiers and stuff because at our school we have a military kids club."

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING:

Parents

- Educate parents about the importance of helping adolescents to become involved in formal support systems. These can range from youth serving organizations to formal counseling.
- Encourage parents to advocate for community-based youth programs for adolescents. Such advocacy can go far in providing support for their own and others' families.

Adolescents

- Encourage and provide adolescents opportunities for involvement in youth serving organizations. This can be a primary way to receive support that supplements that which adolescents receive from friends and family.
- Encourage adolescents to seek formal counseling during particularly stressful times.

KEY POINT:

Regardless of formal support source, most adolescents are open to formal support services if the adolescents feel like those services are relevant and that the adults offering those services can empathize with adolescents because of their own similar experiences with deployment.

SUPPORT PROCESSES

INTRODUCTION: Within both formal and informal support are a set of processes, sometimes called support functions, which adolescents find helpful. Usually these functions are associated with what individual people say or do. These processes can be instrumental or practical, or more emotional or psychological.

QUESTION ASKED: What do those people who you go to for support do that you find to be helpful?

THEMES:

- **Understanding.** Most adolescents used the term “understand” when describing how others are helpful to them.
- **Listening.** Adolescents also often pointed to people who just “listened” rather than had a lot to say to them.
- **Distractions.** Often times activities or environments where their mind was taken off of deployment and its associated changes were helpful.
- **Assurance.** The content of what others said to adolescents often assured them that things would eventually work out, and that their parent would eventually be home.
- **Expression Opportunity.** Interacting with others around their deployment experience provided the opportunity to talk about their frustrations, and to vent.
- **Information.** Support also came in the form of information to adolescents, often about how to cope with their feelings about deployment.
- **Tasks.** Adolescents also talked about people who came to their house to help with household tasks and chores, including maintenance.
- **Wary Responses to Support.** There were also a number of adolescents who indicated displeasure with people who claimed to understand their situation but had no similar experiences.
- **Talking Fatigue.** Occasionally adolescents said they were tired of talking about and focusing on deployment-related issues and feelings. They said other things were going on in their lives other than deployment. One adolescent said that after awhile all the attention gets old.

QUOTES:

“And then I go to the Youth Center a lot and the people there are going to be understanding because they go through it too.”

“At first when my dad got deployed, there was a lot of support as in like people calling, people giving us, you know, food and stuff. But then as time went on, it just kind of died down and nobody really cared that we was deployed.”

“Like at times it would be helpful but then when you’re getting mad that your parent isn’t there and somebody just keeps asking about them.”

“You know sometimes you have that neighbor who wouldn’t talk to you because someone’s gone, you know, they are just doing it out of pity.”

“I go to the Teen Center to keep me active and doing something so I can forget about it.”

“It makes you feel special when you get an email, you know, instead of just a blank page or nothing at all.”

“They just tell me to try to calm down, and also suggest what I can do to help myself.”

“My friend’s dad went through the Desert Storm thing, and he can just really relate to what I’m going through and he knows exactly.”

“We all went to a program for military families where we could all vent and talk about frustrations.”

“My friend and I lived together when her dad was deployed. Since I kind of helped her out when he was gone, and now even though we’re like a thousand miles apart, she still helps me like over email and stuff.”

“My neighbor, he and my dad are real close and sometimes my neighbor will come and help me mow the lawn.”

“One or two people from the church took us out and we went out like last time and saw a movie. And mom got to go do stuff by herself.”

“I have one friend that will talk about it because she has a brother being deployed soon. But all the rest of my friends don’t, it sort of makes them uncomfortable for me to talk about it, and that makes me uncomfortable, too.”

“My guidance counselor will like ask me like what makes you feel happy.”

“I don’t want to talk about it 24/7. I want to go out, have fun, get together, eat, you know? I don’t want to just talk about it, you know, deployment and stuff because there’s other things happening in our lives, you know.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTING:

Parents

- Encourage parents to provide opportunities for adolescents to talk about the deployment and/or their concerns.
- Encourage parents to provide opportunities to talk about other things besides the deployment experience.
- Encourage parents to put aside their own worries and to try to view the deployment from their adolescent’s point of view.
- Encourage parents to provide opportunities for adolescents to talk with other adults or adolescents who have experience with deployment.

Adolescents

- Encourage a willingness to be open to the support other adolescents and adults try to provide.
- Encourage adolescents to be open to providing support to other adolescents who may be experiencing deployment. Their own experiences may help them to help others.

KEY POINT:

Support processes that adolescents say are helpful include listening, understanding, and providing assurance.

WISH LIST RESOURCES

INTRODUCTION: For the most part, supports for adolescents are determined by adults, including their parents. However, there may be another layer of supports that adolescents find helpful that they may or may not have experienced. In that case, their insights into desired resources become important for improving quality supports for adolescents.

QUESTION ASKED: What would make your life easier when your parent is deployed?

THEMES:

- **Distractions.** Adolescents don't want to be constantly reminded that they have a deployed parent. They need time to forget about it. Many said they really enjoyed the NMFA camps because they provided the right mix of fun/distraction and conversations with others who really understood what they were going through.
- **Video Contact.** Adolescents want to be able to see the deployed parent. This would provide a kind of a reality check to see if the parent is really okay. It also helps them to visualize where they are and what they are doing.
- **Opportunities to talk to deployed parent.** While adolescents reported a great deal of access to their deployed parent, they still wanted more. They mentioned wanting more cell phone, instant messaging and email access.
- **Formal supports.** The idea of more formal support in the form of programs or activities received mixed reviews. Some adolescents thought this would be very helpful, while others did not. Those that were in favor of formal programs suggested that having a 1:1 mentor who had experience with deployment would be helpful; others preferred a group setting. Adolescents said they would prefer that formal programs include a mix of fun and information so they weren't just forced to think about the deployment. Adolescents also mentioned that contact with extended family was/could be an important source of support. Websites for military adolescents where they can communicate with each other were also mentioned.

QUOTES:

"I think it would be good if you were talking to someone that's gone through the same thing and they know how it feels. And so you can basically let out what you feel, but they person will understand what you're talking about because they already know how it feels."

"I like dealing with it myself. But for other people that do like need the support and stuff, I think that it would be a lot better if it was someone who actually went though it and is like not their age but around there somewhere so they could relate to them more. Because I tried that before, tried to do the one-on-one thing, and it was some old dude that pretended to know how I felt but I knew he didn't. So it really frustrated me that he thought he could do anything."

“We should be able to like...be able to see what or parents are like, that are deployed are doing. See what their surroundings are like and like see how they’re looking or if they’re scratched up or something like that so if you know they’re fibbing to us or something like, well, nothing bad happened to me or...but really they got hurt or something, they’re just keeping it fro the family that we have proof that they’re lying to us or something.”

“More activities...Just something...I’m going to have to say a bus that would come around and get me to go some places because if my mom’s at work, I don’t have anything to do...”

“...I’d rather have a, you know, like just bond and talk about it. But like honestly, I don’t want to just sit here and, oh, my dad’s gone. I don’t want to talk about that 24-7. I want to go out, have fun, get together, eat you know? I don’t want to just talk about deployment and stuff because there’s other things happening in our lives you know...like occasionally talk about it but no like every time—so how do you feel?” because it just gets annoying and it’s like numbing..”

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROVIDING SUPPORT:

Parents

- Encourage parents to provide diverse ways for adolescents to keep connected with deployed parents. Let them know that more personal, interactive ways are preferred.
- Help parents realize that it is important not to expect adolescents to continually focus on deployment but to reinforce full participation in everyday life; opportunities for diverse activities must be provided.
- Encourage parents to interact with adolescents and with youth serving professionals to discern formal supports that are in the best interests of adolescents.

Adolescents

- Help adolescents to recognize that a variety of resources can be helpful, including being a resource to other adolescents (mentoring or confidant relationship).
- Help adolescents explore what method would best help them to stay in contact with the deployed parent.

KEY POINT:

Adolescents desire support that brings them closer to the deployed parent, whether it be increased virtual contact or connections with others with deployment experiences.

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APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**Focus Group Interview Protocol
Revised-July 3, 2004**

**Examining the Effect of the Deployment Cycle on Adolescent
Adjustment among Youth in Military Families**

I. Introduction and Instructions:

- We're trying to understand what life is like for you when one/both of your parents is deployed. Deployment refers to the time when your parent(s) has been informed that they will have to go away for work without their family (so they start preparing), the time they actually go away (like to Iraq or to Afghanistan) through the time when they come home.
- We want to know how your life has changed during this time. We want to know what things in your life change and what stays the same. We want to know how you feel about the situation, and what you do to deal with stress.
- To begin, we just want to get a sense of who you are and where your parent is in the deployment process.
- There are no right or wrong answers to the questions we are asking. The important thing is that you get an opportunity to tell about your experiences.

II. Your Experience with Deployment:

- Has your parent ever deployed?
- Is your parent deployed right now?
- Which of your parents has been (is) deployed?
- About how long has he/she been away (either in the past, or at the present time)?
- How many times has your parent been deployed?

III. Your Daily Life When Your Parent is Deployed: Graffiti Wall

[These items were written on flip chart pages posted around the room. Participants were asked to walk around and respond to the questions. Each flip chart page becomes a mini "graffiti wall".]

- When I first found out my parent was going away I felt...
- The worst thing about having a parent deployed is...
- What worries me the most when my parent is deployed is...
- What worries me the least when my parent is deployed is...
- The best thing about having a parent deployed is...
- The worst thing about having a parent deployed is...

IV. Your Daily Life When Your Parent is Deployed: Group Discussion Questions

A. General Personal and Family Changes Related to Deployment:

- How has/does your life change when your parent(s) is deployed?

- What is different in day to day tasks or activities? What is the same? (e.g. Roles at home, after-school activities, Relationship with parent/siblings)
- Has your behavior changed since your parent has been deployed? If so, how? (e.g. changes in sleeping, eating, fights with parents or siblings, grades etc.)

B. Stresses in Your Life:

- There are many changes that go along with being a adolescentager. What kind of stresses (both good and bad) do you have in your life right now (e.g. school, friends, work, home, activities, siblings)?
- How do these change during deployment?
- What do you do to help you feel less stressed? Do you handle stress differently depending on the situation or who you are with? How does it change?
- How much influence does the media/news coverage of war have on you when your parent is deployed? Does this kind of information help you or cause more worry?
- What other ways do you get information about what is going on with the military? From other military members? Other military family adolescents?

C. Support You Get from Others During Deployment:

- Who do you go to when you are stressed? Friends? Family? Adults you know? School?
- Think for a moment about these people who are helpful to you. Exactly how do they help you?
- Is there a particular person or persons who seem to be the most helpful? What is it they do to be helpful?
- How much do you talk with friends about your parent being deployed?
- Does the help you get from others change when your parent is deployed? Or is it pretty much the same all the time?
- Right now what is the top thing that helps you when a parent is deployed? It could be a person, an activity, or most anything related to when your parent is away for his/her military job.
- Right now what is the thing that helps you the least when your parent is deployed?
- How do you stay in contact with your parent when he/she is deployed?
- What would make your life easier when your parent is deployed?

D. When Your Parent Returns Home:

- Have you experienced your parent returning from a deployment?
- If you have already experienced that, what was it like? Does anything stand out in your mind? Did anything change in your life or in you family when your parent returned?

E. General Well-Being

- Thinking about your life as a whole right now, on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being really bad and 10 being really good, how are things going for you right now?

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